Title for thread in r/Murderbot: Do you read Murderbot as a male or female character?

Posted by **dec10**

November 29 2023

Based solely on the the cover art of the first book (at least how I viewed it), my head canon is that she is female and presented as such when she showed her face in the opening scene. Later cover art has had her look more masculine. I think my wife reads her as male. I also know a SecUnit is post-gender at this point, but her bio material would have chromosomes, right?

Muted-Corgi-1268

November 30 2023

The correct answer is, of course, neither. Murderbot has no gender or sex, canonically uses “it/its” pronouns, is described as having a “generic human” face, is “as indifferent to human gender as it is

physically possible to be without being unconscious," and has a feed ID that says "gender = not applicable." So yeah. Cannon evidence overwhelmingly says that Murderbot has no gender (or arguably is "agender").

All that being said, I do imagine Murderbot with a deeper feminine voice (probably because I read internally with my own voice and therefore MB has my voice which is deeper and feminine). When I'm not paying attention, I tend to use "he/him" pronouns, although I try to correct myself when that happens. I'm not entirely sure why i slip like that. Maybe because MB is tall, has short hair, and is boob-less which in my head is more masculine presenting. Maybe because I tend to identify and relate more to male characters and so I've subconsciously ascribed "male" to Murderbot. Maybe because I give all my stuffed animals "he/him" pronouns and therefore tend to give non-gendered things "he/him" pronouns by default. (It's worth mentioning here that I am cis female and a lesbian so idk why I tend towards using he/him for everything).

Jolly-Bell-5248

March 26 2024

Thank you for correcting yourself when you do slip up! I think it would be easier if Martha Wells hadn't decided to write this series in 1st person POV, it's a very clear cop out on her part to actually using Murderbot's pronouns. People wouldn't struggle so much to use the right ones if she'd use them herself.

Muted-Corgi-1268

March 31 2024

I mean I don’t think it’s a cop out? It’s just first person, which is a really cool narrative choice for a non-human.

Jolly-Bell-5248

March 31 2024

Okay, sorry this is long, I love these books, I've read almost everything Martha Wells has written and love to think about them, I'm nonbinary and use it/its pronouns, I love analyzing media I enjoy, and I'm autistic and have ADHD, so this all adds up to me liking to talk about things I care about. At length.

Please note: I'm not angry or anything, so please don't read this as hostile, that's not my intention lol.

Unfortunately it definitely is a cop out, this is an established pattern for binary writers. We all live in a society that is exorsexist -- meaning, hates nonbinary people. Like all forms of systemic bigotry, this seeps into people's behaviors whether they're aware of it or not.

Martha Wells has always written all of her other stories in 3rd person POV, but this series, the one with a protagonist who uses neopronouns, is only in

1st person *until* it's the short story from Mensah's POV, when it goes back to 3rd person. Because unlike Murderbot, Mensah doesn't use neopronouns, she uses regular ol' she/her.

Martha Wells isn't the only writer ever to suddenly switch to 1st person to avoid using a protagonist's neopronouns, but she is the most recent example I've seen.

Another very blatant example is the Xenogenesis series by Octavia E. Butler, which coincidentally, also has the POV suddenly switch to 1st person as soon as the protago is a character who uses it/its pronouns.

The first book has a protag who uses she/her, the second he/him, and both of those are in 3rd person POV. But as soon as the protag of the 3rd book uses it/its, suddenly it's 1st person POV, even though there's no narrative reason to justify it. She made that decision because she didn't want to use the character's it/its pronouns with the same level of casualness that she used the other characters she/her and he/him pronouns, despite the first two novels

using them normally for secondary characters. It's not like she didn't know how to use them, she's the one who gave the aliens 3 distinct reproductive sexes!

And I've read a lot of series with nonhuman protagonists from 1st person POV, it's not all that special, it's pretty common for a lot of scifi and fantasy with other sentient species.

Martha Wells' largest series, The Books of the Raksura, actually has all nonhuman protagonists, since humans literally do not exist on that planet, and the entire thing, including all of the short stories, is told purely in 3rd person POV.

It's not unusual for authors to use 1st person POV for nonhuman characters.

It might seem like an innocent decision at first glance, but when you look at Martha Wells' history of writing, seeing everything else in 3rd person POV, and consider the way neopronouns and nonbinary people are treated in our society, plus the fact that she immediately switches back to her "regular" method of

3rd person POV as soon as a character who uses she/her is the protagonist, and it becomes clear that she specifically chose 1st person POV for this series so she could avoid using Murderbot's pronouns as much as possible.

And like I said, she's not the only one to ever have this problem. Octavia E. Butler did it, and I know at least 3 more examples but I'm having a brain fart.

To be clear, I don't blame anyone for not immediately noticing this. It took me like, *checks when I first read the first book* 2 years from first reading All Systems Red to suddenly realizing "*Oh!* She did this series in 1st person POV to avoid using Murderbot's pronouns" when I finally sat down and looked at everything else she'd written, to see that it was all 3rd person POV.

And don't forget, that if she had written this series in her usual style, 3rd person, there'd be absolutely no room for doubt for what Murderbot's pronouns are, since she's so far adamantly refused to just have it tell anyone, for some reason. (hint: it's more exorsexism,

unfortunately. At least when Octavia Butler did this, she had the protagonist tell people its pronouns.)

Here I'll just pick a random paragraph from the 1st book to demonstrate:

Original, in 1st person POV. Zero use of Murderbot's pronouns:

"I didn’t want to put Bharadwaj down because something in my abdomen was severely damaged and I wasn’t sure I could pick her up again. I ran my field camera back a little and saw I had gotten stabbed with a tooth, or maybe a cilia. Did I mean a cilia or was that something else? They don’t give murderbots decent education modules on anything except murdering, and even those are the cheap versions. I was looking it up in HubSystem’s language center when the little hopper landed nearby. I let my helmet seal and go opaque as it settled on the grass."

Now in 3rd person POV, constant use of Murderbot's pronouns:

"Murderbot didn’t want to put Bharadwaj down because something in its abdomen was severely damaged and it wasn’t sure it could pick her up again. It ran its field camera back a little and saw it had gotten stabbed with a tooth, or maybe a cilia. Did it mean a cilia or was that something else? They don’t give murderbots decent education modules on anything except murdering, and even those are the cheap versions. Murderbot was looking it up in HubSystem’s language center when the little hopper landed nearby. It let its helmet seal and go opaque as the hopper settled on the grass."

If she hadn't decided to avoid using Murderbot's pronouns as much as possible by using 1st person POV, no one would have any doubt what Murderbot's pronouns are. But because she *both* refuses to have it ever tell anyone, and uses nothing but 1st person POV, it is, unfortunately, absolutely her fault that so many people misgender Murderbot, even with seven whole entire books published.

At the end of the day, she's the author, and she has a responsibility to clearly communicate important

information about the characters, especially the protagonist, to the audience.

She's refused to have Murderbot tell anyone its pronouns, and has made the decision to use the narration tactic that allows her to use its pronouns the least amount as possible.

If she had as many other books in 3rd person POV who had it/its pronouns as she does with characters who use he/him or she/her, it'd be fine. But she doesn't. And we do have to deal with the reality that exorsexism and transmisia exist, rather than pretending they don't, and that these things seep into people's writing, especially if they're cis.

I like Martha Wells writing, but she has a very clear history of transmisia, unintended or not, and her making the decision to use 1st person POV only when it's for a character who uses it/its pronouns is just a very clear continuation of that bigotry, whether she intends it or not.

No one wakes up in the morning and says, "Today, I'm going to be a bigot!", but people are still bigoted, and still do bigoted things even when they're not trying to.

Martha Wells probably wasn't trying to be exorsexist when she started writing The Murderbot Diaries. But she still made decisions *guided* by exorsexism, even if she wasn't *consciously* aware of that's why she was making those decisions.

She has used 1st person POV, and absolutely refuses to have Murderbot simply tell anyone its pronouns, because she's still exorsexist, even now that she's written a nonbinary OC who uses neopronouns.

The only reason Murderbot's nonbinary in the first place is because it's another iteration of the "nonbinary robot/alien" stereotype, and Martha Wells' history of biological essentialism still has an unbroken streak even 7 books into this series. Murderbot's nonbinary and aroace because it's a robot who has no sex, and in Mratha Wells' mind, sex = gender. So if you have no sex, then you simply can't have a gender.

There's a reason the only explicitly nonbinary humans in this series are simply token characters who appear for about 5 seconds, and then get shoved off screen as quickly as possible, never to be seen again.

I don't know if you've read System Collapse (book 7) yet, so I won't mention any spoilers, but there's one scene in there that just...further cements the exorsexism and was really upsetting to read. I've been waiting for the next book to come out, hoping Martha Wells would have taken the time to speak to actual nonbinary trans people, but I clearly got my hopes up for nothing, because not only has she not improved, she's just doubling down at this point.

Martha Wells chose to write this series, out of all of her many series, in 1st person POV, and then dumps that POV as soon as it's a character who uses she/her. She refuses to ever have Murderbot tell anyone its pronouns are it/its within the story or even within in-character Q&A sessions. She doesn't even have *other* characters tell people Murderbot's pronouns are it/its! and these characters *explicitly* do not even list their pronouns in their feed bios.

The use of 1st person POV for this series was chosen because Murderbot uses it/its pronouns. And even if someone wants to say "well it's called the Murderbot *Diaries*, it has to be in 1st person", that's incorrect. It could all be in 3rd person POV like her normal style, and then we get to see what Murderbot writes for the actual diary entries written in 1st person POV.

Like I said before, Martha Wells is the author. She has a responsibility to clearly communicate information to the audience, especially when it's crucial information about the protagonist, like what pronouns it uses.

Especially because so many people don't even realize that real people like me exist who use these pronouns. Martha Wells had the opportunity to make a difference, and help normalize these pronouns for people, but she chose the easy, very lazy way out by not only using 1st person POV, but also never having Murderbot actually confirm that its pronouns are it/its.

It is Martha Wells' fault that so many people in this fandom think it's okay to "debate" about what

Murderbot's "real" pronouns and gender and sex are. Her job is to communicate clearly that its pronouns are it/its, but she keep refusing at every opportunity.

And that's just exorsexism, plain and simple, even if she's not waking up in the morning and declaring that she's going to be a bigot to nonbinary people.

I love Martha Wells writing. There's a reason I've read almost everything she's published over the last few decades, and spend this much time typing giant responses like this going over all the details to explain the problem.

Martha Wells' writing has a history of being exorsexist,transmisic, and more, and that streak continues unbroken to this day. It's important that people learn to recognize these kinds of bigotry in writing, especially when it's stories they enjoy.

I've read The Murderbot Diaries at least 4 times over now, and that's because I love these characters. But the problems with this series are also very real and need to be acknowledged.

I don't blame people for not realizing the problems are there on their own if they don't already have experience with these kinds of bigotry, but I hope that people will be willing to listen and learn to recognize it for themselves once it's pointed out.

Thank you for reading this giant 1.8K word reply lol. If anything I said is confusing, let me know and I will attempt to clarify further.

TLDR: Exorsexism is a thing, and Martha Wells' writing unfortunately has a history of it, which becomes clear when you read everything else she's written and look at how she only uses 1st person POV when it's a character who uses neopronouns.